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INNOVATIVE LIBRARIANS: HARNESSING PASSION AND INVOLVEMENT FOR LIBRARY METAMORPHOSIS

T. BADHAM¹, M. CHIVERS², W. FRERICHS³, S. DART⁴

¹ RMIT University Library, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria,
<tristan.badham@rmit.edu.au>

² RMIT University Library, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria,
<melanie.chivers@rmit.edu.au>

³ RMIT University Library, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria,
<wendy.frerichs@rmit.edu.au>

⁴ RMIT University Library, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria,
<sian.dart@rmit.edu.au>

ABSTRACT

During 2010 the RMIT University Library formed the 'Innovative Librarians Group' (ILG). The idea for the ILG was conceived from a debrief meeting with the University Librarian and acting Staff Development Librarian for the group's leader on her return from the Aurora leadership course. The ILG combined her interests in shifting the library staff mindset toward innovation and forward thinking, and integrating a technology focus into the library environment.

The initial expression of interest invited library staff who were "keen to explore, trial and think about new ideas, new technologies and new processes that may be useful in the library and to cultivate an attitude of forward thinking, engagement and investigation". And that's what we have: a diverse group of (relatively) new librarians sharing an interest in technology and a desire to initiate library innovation. This paper discusses the group's formation, practical logistics, its endeavour to trigger a metamorphosis in library staff thinking regarding technology and our future direction.

The ILG's main focus is to investigate, test and recommend technologies for library use. We focus on library-relevant tools that can enhance existing processes and workflows for staff and users. Our decisions and recommendations are supported by the library's senior management. Many tools first investigated by the ILG are now in regular use by library staff in Melbourne and Vietnam, and at our Associate Director's request we created an internal social media policy.

The formation of the ILG at RMIT University Library has allowed group members to experiment and promote ideas with workplace support, contributed to individual development and clearly benefited the library. The ILG has become a 'go to' group for library management, testing projects before broad

implementation and contributing ideas for future projects. What more can we ask for, for ourselves or our library?

1. FORMATION OF THE GROUP

RMIT University Library's Innovative Librarians Group (ILG) was conceived from a debrief meeting between the University Librarian¹, the Acting Professional Development Librarian² and a Reference Librarian recently returned from an Aurora leadership course³. The group would serve two purposes: provide an opportunity for the librarian to reinforce her newly-learned leadership skills with practical experience; and foster a culture of innovation and engagement with technology among current library staff.

1.1. What is the group?

The terms of reference say that the purpose of the group is to engage with and investigate emerging technologies, to assess and recommend use of applications that are relevant in a library setting, and to cultivate an attitude of forward thinking. This translates into proactively seeking out new and emerging technologies, seeing how they work by playing with them, and then devising creative and innovative applications for them in the library. One of the intended outcomes of the group, as envisaged by library management, is that it will lead to a culture of sharing ideas and generating discussion in the wider RMIT University Library group relating to innovative technological and web based discoveries. In its initial six months the group was not widely publicised, this year however group members will host L-plate sessions (half hour technology overviews) at three of the six library sites in an effort to provide some return to the wider library.

2. HURDLES AND HELPERS

Creating the group was one thing, but metamorphosing from an idea into the vibrant and active group we are today was more complex. Early meetings were facilitated by the group leader, and all members were encouraged to 'go forth and discover' technologies that could have possible applications in the library and bring back results to share with the group. During those first six months library staff working on innovative projects from outside the group were enlisted as 'guest speakers' so the group could learn from internal experts and also as a knowledge sharing exercise in the library. The group leader funnelled the best of the group's research to management and made suggestions for equipment purchases and the implementation of various web based applications. While group members were enjoying this period of experimentation, learning and sanctioned 'play', the group was not having as much impact on the wider library to the extent members felt was possible.

It was time for the innovative tadpoles to explore the wider world and start nibbling at the edges of library culture. It became clear that the group was lopsided when it came to meeting contributions and research work. Many staff expressed interest but could not make meetings, or were too busy to research and contribute to group meetings. Some staff members were interested but did not see the personal value of involvement. A second expression of interest was requested, with a confirmation of approval for time-release for meetings and research from the appropriate line-manager. As a result,

¹Craig Anderson

²Charles Barnett

³Wendy Frerichs

the active group shrank to less than ten. Now, in theory, all the Innovative Librarians had permission and time for innovative projects, whatever they might turn out to be. Being encouraged to experiment with new tools, toys and procedures at work and knowing that successful experiments could lead to real change in the RMIT University Library was motivation enough for the new, leaner Innovative Librarians Group. "Being innovative" was a little vague, and making sweeping changes to library processes and policies a little ambitious, but having this small group available and keen to work inspired managers to find specific projects to channel the group's energies.

The first formal request came from the Associate Director, Library Information Services⁴ to write an internal social media policy for library staff. Working on a project made meetings more focused, and still provided freedom to explore new ideas - and in fact, during the project, the ILG used several novel technologies to facilitate collaboration. Next came a request from a Site Manager⁵ for the group to investigate the usability and compatibility of Skype with RMIT's networks for a cross-site workshop. Then the group was asked to conduct pre-testing for a roving iPad trial by another Site Manager⁶. Had the group finally found its niche?

Managerial support was strong at all levels. The University Librarian enthusiastically purchased requested tools for the ILG, meaningful projects such as the writing of (social media) policy were confidently delegated to the group, the ILG was supported by site managers as evidenced by their conferring of project work, and by line managers as evidenced by their approval of time release for group meetings and workshops. Having the independence to question current practices, and clear support to experiment, meant group proposals were taken seriously by other managers and colleagues.

Limiting exploration to tools functional within RMIT's Information Technology environment was challenging. Software installations must be approved and installed by IT staff unless established as a need across the entire Library or University. The non-existent budget meant the initial focus was on free software, apps and innovations - which certainly made the business cases easier for implementation. Staff were encouraged or situationally required to use technologies suggested by the ILG, such as Skype and Yammer for communication and collaboration, resulting in various levels of ongoing use. As in any workplace, not all library staff were initially excited about change and adopting new practices, but the group hopes to continue to gain converts as it continues.

3. NOTABLE SUCCESSES

The ILG has investigated many tools and technologies; some of these technologies have been judged as irrelevant to the library (or not relevant with the current software supported). However, these should not be seen as failures, as a goal of the group is to encourage attitudinal change and for staff to consider new practices, and the act of experimenting is itself rewarding. Research has been carried out individually, in sub-groups, and by the entire group. The researched tools have then been reported and discussed in ILG meetings.

⁴Deidre Gillespie

⁵Lynn Murdoch

⁶Tanya Bramley

As well as testing various technologies, the group has succeeded in that it has actively made a difference to the way the library functions and has had the opportunity to influence thinking among other library staff members. It has also been an excellent professional development opportunity for members to write and present conference papers, deliver training sessions, and gain experience and knowledge outside of normal work roles. The following section will outline some notable successes thus far for the ILG.

3.1. Yammer

One of the first products investigated by the ILG was Yammer⁷; Yammer is a secure social network within an organisation that works much like Facebook. An RMIT staff member external to the library had previously created the RMIT network but there were few users and little visible interaction. An ILG member⁸ created an RMIT University Library group allowing library staff to interact privately from non-library RMIT staff. All RMIT library staff were sent an invitation to sign up. She also requested the Yammer desktop application be made available for installation for all staff. RMIT's IT department approved this request, thereby making Yammer much more accessible.

There was an initial rush of staff registrations on Yammer and since the initial period there has been a steady increase to the point where ninety-six library staff have joined Yammer of a total 154 FTE staff. Seventy-one library staff have joined the RMIT University Library group, with a regular flow of interaction both within the library group and throughout the wider RMIT Yammer site. Posts on Yammer have been mixed, with many links to interesting articles about teaching, academia or libraries, some comments on - as Yammer asks for status updates as "What are you working on", and some discussion of internal RMIT practices, made more interesting by cross-departmental banter. RMIT University has six library sites in Melbourne and most staff rarely visit other campuses, resulting in limited interaction between staff working at different sites. Yammer has undoubtedly increased interaction between sites and departments, both within and external to the library, and has encouraged comment and conversation from people who may not otherwise have had an opportunity to communicate with so many of their colleagues.

A number of teams and groups have set up private groups on Yammer. For example, a school liaison team carried out a full team meeting on Yammer within such a group over two days; posts were created on different agenda items and members could comment on the discussion as schedules permitted. The extended and online nature of such a meeting allows for more staff involvement than would typically be possible, even allowing one staff member to contribute from overseas.

In an attempt to foster not just inter-campus, but international collaborating, the ILG endeavoured to invite the participation of library staff located at RMIT's Vietnam campuses. Unfortunately, offshore RMIT employees have a different email suffix, resulting in Yammer deeming them a different organisation. To remedy this, the entire RMIT University network would need to be upgraded to the premium Yammer service, which unfortunately is too costly at this stage. Despite this setback RMIT University Library staff at both the Hanoi and Saigon South Vietnam campuses have created their own Yammer network for more effective communication between their campuses.

⁷ <https://www.yammer.com>

⁸Keely Chapman

3.2. iPad roving

The site manager⁹ at RMIT University's largest and busiest library approached the ILG to discuss the possibility of setting up a roving reference trial within the library. Together the group and manager decided to run a roving reference trial using iPads over the first four weeks of semester in 2011, when the library was at its busiest with new students. The manager was concerned that staff may not be easily identified, so it was decided that roving staff would wear RMIT University Library branded shirts during the trial.

The library already owned two iPads, previously used by library staff for familiarisation and specific events. Members of the ILG tested RMIT's wireless network and decided that the iPad would be most effective relatively close to the library's entrance, where a good wireless connection could be ensured and new students could easily seek assistance.

3.2.1. Barriers

Initially there was hesitation and resistance from several staff members, both to the branded shirts and to the iPad. Unfamiliarity with iPads led some staff to be nervous about using them in front of students, but in most cases, this was overcome with training and practice before the trial began. As the concept of roving was also on trial, some staff felt awkward away from the desk, especially during quiet times. This could be remedied with further general roving training, but may also require practice to feel at ease without the formality and safety of a desk. There were occasional wireless connection issues and some staff reported that the iPad was cumbersome and not suited for in-depth reference queries, but most feedback on the trial was positive.

3.2.1. Outcomes

A survey (conducted through SurveyMonkey) of participating staff after the trial asked 'How would you rate the trial of roving reference service (Scale 1-4 with 1 not worthwhile and 4 being extremely worthwhile)?' This question yielded an average response of 3.27, with only one response below 3. Student responses to the trial were considered overwhelmingly positive. Both to branded shirts and to the iPads, whether used by staff or handed to students for guiding through their query. Reference queries significantly increased from the same period the previous year with the introduction of roving reference, even accounting for an increase in year-to-year door count. Some staff enjoyed the iPad's flexibility and reported it was intuitive and a worthwhile exercise. As a result, there will be a further trial of iPad Roving in the initial weeks of semester 2, 2011.

3.3. Social Media Policy

The increase in the use of internal communication (particularly the uptake of Yammer) led to library management commissioning the ILG to research and write a document outlining expected behaviour of library staff. This policy focuses on the use of internal social media (the library has a separate document guiding interaction in public or external environments.) The group investigated Social Media Policies from other organisations and libraries and used these along with other relevant RMIT documents to develop a policy relevant to RMIT University Library. Senior library management praised the final report, and were recently able to point a high level RMIT University Communication Unit towards our policy, when a discussion regarding RMIT's official university-wide social communication policy broke out on Yammer.

⁹Tanya Bramley

3.4. Skype

At the request of a different Library Site Manager¹⁰, the ILG investigated and undertook technical testing of Skype's videoconferencing and teleconferencing facilities for use in cross-campus meetings, specifically the 2010 end of year Reference Workshop. As a result, RMIT's IT department installed the latest Skype client on all library staff computers and a number of headphone/microphone sets were purchased which can be requested for use by staff as needed. Some staff use the Skype messaging application for work as an informal and less intrusive form of communication than email or phone. There are also plans for cross-campus training sessions using Skype in 2011.

4. WHAT'S NEXT FOR RMIT'S INNOVATIVE LIBRARIANS

The structure of the ILG and the projects that the group has worked on have been in a constant state of flux; the resulting flexible structure of the group and its projects have been embraced by library management. The group aims to constantly review its purpose, and continue to maintain its flexibility with an eye to a few projects and ideas at once.

The group has decided to work in two ways: to set the agenda and investigate technologies and practices that seem interesting and relevant, and perhaps suggest them to relevant managers; and a slightly more passive approach by "advertising" the group's abilities to library managers so they can approach the group for anything they would like investigated or tested.

As of April 2011 a project that the ILG has identified is a review of the communication methods and strategies employed at the library's reference desks. During meetings in early 2011 the group discussed improvements to communication between reference librarians across the multiple sites, as each campus library appears to have separate information-sharing methods. Although each library site supports the subjects taught at their particular campus, staff and students use all libraries and will often have enquiries about subject areas and resources that are unfamiliar to librarians not at their home campus.

Some steps have been taken to facilitate communication and knowledge-sharing between the Business and Swanston libraries as they are due to merge in 2013. Staff have begun swapping regular shifts on the Reference and Service desks, some people may swap positions for a designated time, and a blog is used to ensure information is shared between the two groups (the "BusiSwan" blog includes relevant information for staff to refer to – for example, regular news updates for staff and suggestions for reference enquiries).

As a means of facilitating communication between various library reference groups, the ILG has discussed the possibility of constructing a library-wide information and knowledge-sharing portal to which all reference librarians could contribute. This will most likely be a wiki but the idea is in its infancy and will be developed further during 2011.

Some additional ideas for the future of the ILG include:

¹⁰Lynn Murdoch

- Chairing of the monthly meetings will be rotated to allow each group member the opportunity to set the agenda, facilitate, and introduce ideas for discussion. This will provide members with experience in running meetings, and will contribute to their development in working within organisations (and most probably introduce the group to new perspectives).
- Members of the ILG have self-nominated to present short introductory sessions for library staff on a technology that they have researched. These sessions will inform other library staff and open discussion regarding the possible use within the library. The initial sessions planned are for Prezi presentation software offering a visually exciting alternative to PowerPoint slides), Writeboard and Google Documents (both cloud-based collaborative tools) and the possible uses for QR codes and other smartphone applications.
 These sessions are not suggesting that the library adopt or use these applications, but are intended to promote a culture of inquisitiveness and experimentation, and to help contribute to innovative practices being considered by library staff. In short, the group, after having developed individually and as a whole, will be passing on acquired knowledge and skills to the wider library – contributing to the metamorphosis of the organisation.
- Opening the group up to contribution from all RMIT library staff. The group has allowed group members to develop, and to promote “innovative ideas” to the organisation, but there are other people at the library who may want to contribute. We have so far achieved this by creating a group for the Innovative librarians on Yammer and opening membership to anyone who requests it. We intend to build on this idea in the future by creating more avenues for contribution. Involving other library employees would provide new perspectives and using electronic means to do this reinforces collaborative technologies as a regular part of RMIT University Library’s working environment.
- A recent staff survey (2010 RMIT staff survey) identified involvement and input in decision-making as an area that the library, and more broadly the university, should improve. The question we will be focusing on is whether the Innovative Librarians identify practices and technologies that may promote staff involvement’?

As well as the constant flow of ideas and projects to work on, the group has a few issues to consider to ensure the continual contribution to the evolution of their individual development, as well as the group and the library. The group will continue to seek out and promote new ideas -- informally by demonstrating the effectiveness of innovations in everyday work, and formally through arranged training and information sessions. Some changes to the group have been identified, and questions about the group still have to be answered, but this is part of the constantly evolving nature of any group.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

For readers interested in starting a similar group at your library this final section will highlight some of the important steps in the ILG’s ongoing success. Firstly, obtain managerial support. Make sure that your aims and purpose align with the aims and purpose of the library and wider organisation. Remain flexible as these can be subject to change. Be prepared to expound the benefits of the group to the

library. Keep the cost down to maintain managerial support, investigate open access and free web applications and be selective about which products you consider purchasing.

Build and maintain staff buy-in. The support of your co-workers is just as important as management. Be aware that some people may not be open to innovation. Be subtle and try taking small steps. Try to keep every one on side by not forcing ideas on them that may be intimidating. Maintain awareness of relevant new technologies and trends, especially those libraries similar to yours are employing. You could achieve this in part by seeking out and following relevant web sites and blogs, and setting up alerts with them.

Finally, remember you do not need to change the world. Do not become overwhelmed by the vast array of technologies available. Approach innovation in bite-sized chunks, which you can manage easily and which colleagues and managers are more likely to swallow. In this way, you are most likely to affect ongoing positive innovation in your library.

6. CONCLUSION

The RMIT University Library's ILG has evolved from conception with the goals of encouraging innovative behaviour in the library, and helping staff keep up to date with relevant current technologies and providing management experience. The ILG has received ongoing support from management assisted the group in developing from an unwieldy experimental group to a smaller more focused core.

The ILG faces the same ongoing challenges experienced in any library: IT restrictions, budget constraints and staff resistance. In spite of these challenges the group has had ongoing notable successes including the iPad trial, installation and use of Yammer and Skype, and the creation of an internal Social Media Policy to name a few.

The success of the ILG has benefited the group members by allowing them to influence how the library functions and by providing opportunities for professional development. While any metamorphosis in a library's culture is bound to be slow and subtle, the existence of the ILG and its ongoing projects allows, and in some cases compels, staff to explore new technologies and learn from ILG research. It is hoped that the ILG has assisted and will continue to shift the mindset of library staff toward innovation and forward thinking, and assist with the integration of a more technologically-focused library environment. With training sessions planned and projects proposed, the ILG will be active for the rest of 2011 and beyond. As the group continues to evolve and experiment the hope is that it will continue to drive the innovative metamorphosis that it has set in motion within RMIT University Library.